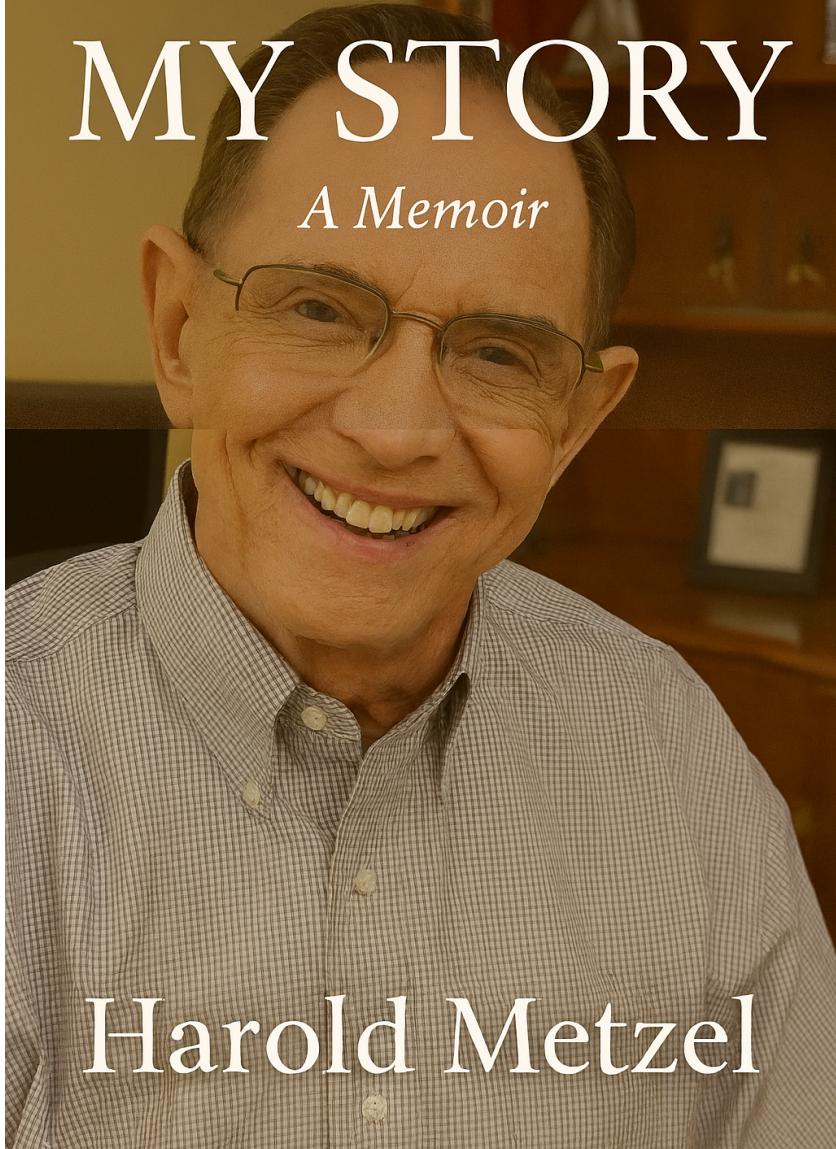


# MY STORY

*A Memoir*



Harold Metzel

# **My Memoir**

## Preface

This memoir began as a response to my son Tim and my informally adopted grandson, Addison. Both encouraged me to record the history of my family for the benefit of future generations. Addison, in particular, felt that the diversity of my careers and life choices would be of interest not only to my heirs but to a broader audience as well.

Creating a memoir that goes beyond recording dates and events requires significant time—and a lot of editing, reworking, and refining. The goal is to make it not only interesting but also respectful of others' privacy. I've been mindful to keep this my story, without violating the confidence of others or including anything that might cause embarrassment.

This is not a polished, final version of my life. Rather, it's an ongoing effort to preserve memories, lessons, and moments that mattered to me. I expect to revise and expand this document as time goes on—adding new recollections, refining old ones, and including stories I had long forgotten until they resurfaced unexpectedly.

Some of what's included here may be familiar to those who've known me for years. Other parts may be new, even surprising. My hope is simply that these stories provide a window into the journey I've lived and perhaps offer a point of connection for those who may one day read them—whether family or friends.

The most current version of this memoir will always be available through the Internet Archive, where I've chosen to keep it freely accessible to anyone.

— Harold Metzel  
July 2025

# **My Story**

## Beginnings

This story is about me, shaped in large part by those who raised me. It established how, at the start, I viewed the world. So let's begin with a brief look at my predecessors.

### My Paternal Lineage

My great grandfather, August, born around 1829 emigrated from somewhere in Germany. He and his wife, Minnie, settled first in LaCrosse, Wisconsin where he worked as a mailman.

His son, my grandfather Herman, married my grandmother, Anna, and they spent the first six or seven years of their married life in LaCrosse. They later moved to Duluth, Minnesota where my father, Rudolph, was born.

Like many immigrants, August apparently changed the spelling of his name in an attempt to make it more phonetic in English. It certainly wasn't Muetzel. Most probably, something like Mützl.

Later in life, I followed his lead. I had my last name legally changed to Metzel when I moved to California—spelling it the way it sounded. It felt like the right time to make the change, starting a new career in a new city. My kids were already adults, so they kept the original spelling

My dad was born on November 22, 1910. The second son and the fifth of six children. When my dad was about nine, the family moved again—this time to Brainerd, Minnesota.

*Dad's most often-told childhood stories focused on this time of his life in Brainerd. Adventurous times of a young boy. He and his friends climbed high into the pine trees and swayed them so dramatically they could jump from one to another, like Tarzan.*

My paternal grandparents maintained a large garden; canned enough to last through the winter; tapped maple trees for syrup; fished, trapped, and hunted for meat; and built whatever they

needed from wood.

*Duluth has rather severe winters with lots of snow and ice. Daily highs hover around 27°F and lows around 15-20°. On cold snaps, it can drop to 15° below zero. Annual snowfall is around seven feet. Add to that the wind from Lake Superior and..., it gets cold!*

*One winter day, I was told, my grandfather went hunting. Snow began falling so heavily that he lost his sense of direction. Far from home, nightfall settled in with the temperature falling below zero. With nowhere to shelter in the woods, he had to make do.*

*His salvation, it turned out, rested within the hollow wooden stock of his double-barreled shotgun. Dad remembered grandpa telling him this story and showing him how to remove the backplate of the wooden gunstock (back end) of the gun. This is where he always kept fresh, dry matches. Just in case.*

*In this case, those matches saved his life. That shotgun became an heirloom—passed from Dad to me, and then to my son.*

I used that gun for several of my adolescent years. It's the best for hunting rabbits, quail, and other birds. These days, however, not many people hunt. I believe it has now found a new home outside our family.

And Dad, having grown up in that environment, loved nature. He sometimes referred to it as his god. Whether trapping, hunting, or especially fishing together, he'd tell me the names of plants, animals, and especially trees that lived around us. He loved all plant and animal life.

Although we hunted, killed, skinned and cleaned all manner of animals and fish, he taught me never to kill without a reason. Kill only what we will eat. Or in protection of our property, pets, and livestock. Don't ever kill just to kill. If shooting for sport, make sure your target is inanimate.

## **My Maternal Lineage**

While my father's past was marked by hardship and adventure, my mother's was more difficult to uncover—and far more painful.

My maternal grandmother's maiden name was Nettie Lawerence. Born March 1, 1880. Over a 30-year period she gave birth to 14 children!

At the age of 17 she first became pregnant and married the father of the child, Asa Thomas. The marriage was an unhappy one. Asa, an alcoholic, either refused or was unable to support the family.

*Mom told us that to support his addiction he would rent his wife out to other men. A dollar a night. She remembered an assortment of men coming into the home and having to listen to the encounters.*

Around 1915, Nettie and Asa were divorced. A year or so later she married my grandfather, Martin Miller, a man I never met.

Grandma's stories of life with him reflected a repeat of life with Asa. What a grind!

To move the story along, it's enough say that my mother grew up poor. Very poor. Literally, from the "wrong side of the railroad tracks." Embarrassed about her roots, she would sneak off to school. Doing what she could to keep her friends from discovering where and how she lived.

Until she met my dad.

Only 5'8", medium build, and not particularly handsome, he nevertheless looked great to this 16 year old girl. A twenty-two year old man with a solid job, strong character, and great sense of humor...? Who could ask for more? It was all she ever wanted.

It's hard, however, to say who got the better deal. Although poor, mom was truly beautiful. Add to that, she was playful, smart, and sexy. All he ever hoped for as well. And so they married when she was 17.

Dad had endured his adolescence during the Great Depression. Working toward a career was out of the question. Even educated

and skilled workers struggled to get jobs. Many stood in soup lines to eat.

The New Deal, launched by President Franklin Roosevelt in the late 1930's provided public work projects including the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC's). This national effort was designed to provide relief, reform, and recovery from that Depression.

This project provided help to millions, including my dad. It was while working for this group that he was sent to work in Streator, Illinois where he met and married my mother.

After finishing his work with the CCC's, they settled in Chicago. We lived there until I was six years old. As you might expect, memories of my very young life in Chicago are vague. Just scattered flashbacks from places we lived.

### **My Entry into the World**

I entered the world in the middle of World War II, on November 29, 1942, in Chicago, Illinois. Dad and mom already had one child, Lois, seven years my senior. A year and half later my sister Sharon joined us.

I have little memory of anything prior to about age five or six. The pictures in my mind start to become clearer after that.

When I was about six, we moved into the basement of my dad's sister Lydia's house. Not a basement apartment—just a bare basement. I don't know why we moved there—perhaps Dad had lost a job—but I remember it as stark and uninviting.

*Concrete walls but at least had a sink and toilet. Dad installed a crude but functional shower. He also hung sheets as dividers on clothes lines he strung to provide rooms and a bit of privacy. Mom cooked our meals on a couple of hot plates. Of course we kids didn't care. We didn't know any better. As long as mom and dad were there..., we were home.*

*The thing I hated most was being around my aunt and uncle. Uncle Werner, (aka) "Uncle Duck" owned a tavern and always smelled like*

*beer. My Aunt Lydia literally stank. She was big, overweight and seemed never to change clothes or bathe.*

*My strongest memory is when I shot Sharon in the head with an arrow!*

*Mom and dad bought a bow and arrow set for me to play with. Just a toy, but equipped with round metal tips to sink into the provided target.*

*My instructions were to never aim at anything but that target. Yet it was such fun to see how high into the air I could shoot the arrows. When they landed, they drove solidly into the ground.*

*Sharon, yelling at me the whole time, ran around the yard with her hands over her head. I thought it funny, until catastrophe finally struck. The arrow landed right on top of her head, just in front of the hairline.*

*Blood running down her face, she screamed and screamed.. I thought I'd killed her. Later, I thought dad might kill me. Anyway, we both survived.*

To cheer up our basement home, mom and dad bought a canary. It's the only bird I remember us ever owning. And could it sing! We named it Peeps.

Mom had been told that only male canaries sing. As Peeps sang its heart out, we assumed it was a boy. Until one day when she laid an egg. Since then, I've learned that some females do sing. Or at least chatter enough to qualify as singing.

*One day in the basement, things seemed a bit too quiet. Mom checked and found Peeps unconscious on the floor of the cage. It did get hot in there!*

*Not knowing what to do--how do you give CPR to a canary?--she held it under the water faucet to revive it, without luck. It just laid there, dead as could be. When Dad came home, he teased her that had she let it cool down it might have lived. As it was, she probably drowned it.*

*Whether from the heat or Mom's good intentions gone wrong, Peeps was gone.*

*At any rate, we required a formal funeral for Peeps. We helped Mom make a little coffin. She emptied a Shredded-Wheat cereal box, filled it with cotton, and amidst many tears we laid Peeps inside.*

*Forming a little procession, we made our way out to the hole we'd dug in the back yard. Although not really a prayer, we each paid our final respects and said our final goodbyes.*

Now for a couple of darker stories.

Lois, now about 14, said that when Mom and Dad weren't home in the evenings, Uncle Duck—usually drunk—would come down to the basement and try to get into bed with her. Terrified, she finally told Mom, despite his threats not to. Between Mom's fury and Lydia's wrath, he got the message—and that behavior stopped.

Here's a final memory for this section:

*I remember one evening, Dad lay face-down on the living room floor while Mom shouted at him. I didn't understand it at the time—he was drunk. Later, even after we moved to Sterling, I'd go with him to the Moose Lodge. He'd have a beer or two while I played with the vending machines. To me, it just seemed normal.*

*Fortunately, my dad did not become an alcoholic. How it came about I don't know. But Lois told me that after having had enough, mom gave him an ultimatum: choose me or the bottle. You can't have both. The seriousness of that apparently straightened him out.*

Both my parents drank socially. When visiting various aunts and uncles my folks would play cards and drink beer, maybe an occasional cocktail. But didn't really party. In fact mom over did it more than dad.

*Once, driving home from a visit, Mom—maybe after one too many—started crying and carrying on. 'Oh, I can't tell you kids how much I love you,' she kept repeating. Finally, Dad said, 'Bess, that's enough. Just shut up!' Sharon and I thought it was hilarious.*

## Sterling, Illinois

When the company needed precision painters at its Sterling, Illinois plant, they asked Dad to transfer. The company produced hard rubber models of a variety of objects. Some decorative, others scientific. His job was to paint the intricate detail.

The company also operated a plant in Sterling, Illinois. Apparently they needed precision painters and asked dad to move there.

Sterling and Rock Falls—twin cities separated by the Rock River—are located in north-central Illinois, about 120 miles west of Chicago. Their combined population was around 15,000.

I was six, Sharon four, and Lois 13 and now in high school. I liked living in Sterling. Seems to me the whole family did. Sharon was still not in school. And having a stay-at-home mom was great.

*My first memory here is one of fear. It was here that I had most of my childhood sicknesses. Measles, chickenpox, and ear aches—bad ones! But scariest of all..., whooping cough.*

*In the middle of the night, I'd jolt awake—unable to breathe. Not even a little. Nothing in, nothing out. My throat completely seized up.*

*Panic-stricken, I'd leap out of bed and run into my parents' room, jumping up and down until they woke. The fear on my face must've said it all.*

*'You can't breathe?' Dad asked. I nodded, too scared to cry.*

*He grabbed me, held me upside down, and told Mom to pound on my back. Finally—with a gasp—my throat opened.*

*This scary routine repeated for weeks. I came to expect it: the waking, the jumping, the pounding.*

*There are few things more terrifying than not being able to breathe.*

The small house in Sterling that dad rented was on the corner and

two-stories high. Bedrooms and bath, upstairs. The downstairs living room not as big as today's bedrooms. A short hallway to the kitchen and the mud-room.

The living room only big enough for a studio couch, one chair, and the radio. On the other hand, this was the biggest and nicest home we'd ever had. A palace compared to our homes in Chicago.

Before television, radio was king. Ours stood in a furniture-style cabinet and was always on—music, talk shows, comedies, and my favorites: westerns and mysteries.

Sundays were special. The whole family was home, along with our dog Cinders. Totally black except for a diamond-shaped white spot on her chest. In Chicago we had Peeps. After that, we always had a dog.

*On Sundays, we kids would spread the funny-papers on the floor while listening to the radio. Dad reading the newspaper and mom in the kitchen with Lois making dinner.*

*It was a tradition on Sunday to have fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy and corn. It's still one of my favorites. On special days, it was either baked ham or roast pork. I now enjoy cooking but have never been able to produce a pork roast like my mother.*

*In the evenings, we'd play parlor games with mom and dad. After all, without television, playing outside, parlor games, and listening to favorite radio programs were how we entertained ourselves.*

As explained earlier, dad worked as a precision painter. Periodically, he'd bring home reject samples of the rubber articles the company made. I remember a wall-plaque of a black panther; a 3-foot tall Santa Claus that stood guard next to our Christmas tree; and a model of the human heart.

*Dad demonstrated how the heart worked. "Doctors use models like this," he said, "to show patients what's happening inside their heart. So when some part of the heart isn't working right, it makes it easier for the doctor to show and explain to the patient."*

*The model, larger than life-size, could be taken apart. By separating the*

*chambers you could see each chamber. Also the detail of arteries, veins, and tiny capillaries. Each painted in different colors and in exact detail..., by my dad!*

In true German tradition, Santa Claus brought the Christmas tree and decorated it while we slept on Christmas Eve.

*We were not allowed to go downstairs the next morning until everyone was up and ready. So the first one awake who dared to wake the others did so. Often, before the sun was up,*

*We had to be dressed and then wait until we were called. Meanwhile, dad went down to turn up the heat and light the tree while mom made coffee.*

*When we came down, the tree stood ablaze with all the lights. Gifts from Santa and from each other piled and arranged under the tree. And the three-foot Santa standing off to the side.*

*It was breath-taking.*

Mom recounted one of her favorite scenes.

*When four-year-old Sharon got down the stairs far enough to see the tree, she just stood still pointing. Unable to speak, eyes big as saucers and only able to say, “Ooh, ooh, ooh!”*

Precisely the desired outcome that parents hope for!

*Opposite our rubber Santa, a three-foot-tall doll stood for Sharon. Next to that, my first new blue bicycle rested on its kickstand.*

*Dad’s salary didn’t provide a lot of extra money. So he’d found a used boy’s Schwinn bike and fixed it up. He put on new tires and painted it so it sparkled.*

*I loved that bike. Only years later did I learn it wasn’t new.*

*Even after those early years, we still did Christmas up big. Still, however, not until Christmas Eve. Now that Santa was busy elsewhere, dad got the tree into the house, on its stand, and strung the lights. When that was done, he considered his job finished.*

*While the rest of us hung ornaments and strung popcorn, dad would play the harmonica and we'd sing all the Christmas carols and songs we could think of. All while eating homemade candy and treats of the season.*

*Absolutely treasured and almost idyllic memories!*

Somewhere during our time in Sterling, Lois became very popular. Her transformation into a young woman had escaped my notice—but the new activity around our house made it clear: we'd entered a new era

*In the afternoon, high school boys started gathering at our house. Wanting to impress her, they also went out of their way to be nice to me. “Let’s play catch.” Or using any other reason they could come up with to hang around the house. Sometimes they would give me a ride in their jalopy. Or even convertible!*

*What fun for me!*

## The Move to Deer Grove

We lived in Sterling for only a couple of years until my folks felt the need to move. To understand that move, there's more to share about their values.

As I already mentioned, my parents grew up during the Great Depression. Consequently, they were fiscally very conservative. Never borrow money. Save every dollar. Do it yourself—or go without.

That mindset shaped nearly every decision they made. I suspect this is what precipitated our move to Deer Grove.

Always looking for ways to save money, they found a place in the country they could rent very cheap. Room to grow a garden and raise chickens and rabbits. Saving money not only on rent, but on food.

Deer Grove, Illinois is located about 10 miles south of Sterling. This small town proudly announced a population of 100! From the vast city of Chicago to a town of 15,000—and now to a village of just 100. How small could we go?

Yet even that wasn't enough. Dad took us out of town a mile or so to a small, now abandoned, farmhouse. An Amish family had lived there earlier. But as their family grew, they had moved to a larger home.

An Amish home allowed no curtains in the windows. No electricity. No running water. Just a hand pump beside the kitchen door and, about fifteen yards away, an outhouse for the other necessities.

Dad agreed with the owner that he would fix the place up as a rental property if the farmer, Mr. Schrock, would supply the money for the materials needed. Dad would do all the labor. Wire the house for electricity. Install indoor plumbing. In short, improve the property to yield a better rental income.

It was here, as a family, that we learned new skills. Sharon was now about seven. Big enough to help.

Together we planted, pulled weeds, and did household chores. Digging the garden by hand, planting the vegetables, raising the chickens and rabbits, and a host of other things.

Before dad got running water into the house, it was my job to pump water and carry it by the bucketful into the kitchen. Water is heavy! Needed for washing dishes, cooking, and the weekly family bath..., I can't count the number of buckets of water I carried.

*I hated Friday nights. That day I had to haul in bucket after bucket of water. Mom heated it on the stove and filled the tub. Not a regular bath tub. A round metal tub, about five feet across and four feet high, stood in the kitchen. It took a lot of water.*

*Then, one at a time, the family took a bath. Starting with the youngest and ending with my dad..., all in the same water. Not quite Little House on the Prairie, but close.*

*We didn't think it strange—this was simply life.”*

The one-room elementary schoolhouse for Sharon and me was only a quarter of a mile away. That meant Mom and Dad could manage without a babysitter. Lois could take the bus to high school and we could walk to school and take our lunch with us.

And mostly fun, except for the rather severe winter months.

In 1952 a storm deposited about 15 inches of snow on the ground. Dad had arranged for a delivery of fuel on that day. Concerned that the truck could not make it up our long driveway, dad and Lois (16 by then) suited up and went out to shovel the lane. But the exertion triggered Dad's first heart attack.

*We didn't have a telephone. So Lois ran to the nearest neighbor and called for an ambulance.*

*This neighbor, a farmer, knew the ambulance would never make it up to*

*the house. Using his tractor—equipped with a frontend loader—he made short work of clearing the driveway. And dad was off to the hospital.*

*The doctor explained that a small blockage had formed, cutting off blood to part of his heart. In 1952, it was thought that a long rest was necessary to recover from a heart attack and dad was ordered to stay in bed for six weeks.*

*I remember that hospital bed. Rented and placed in the middle of the living room, it dominated the space. The rented hospital bed stood in the center of our small living room, towering over our modest furniture.*

*After six weeks of bed rest, dad had to learn to walk again. Getting out of bed a little at a time, training his muscles once again to support his weight.*

Unable to work, dad had lost his job. Although we had food to eat, I remember mom being determined to find employment herself so we kids could have a Christmas.

On more than one occasion mom had told us the story of a little girl who was so poor that Santa never came to her house. She used to wonder if Santa had skipped her house because he'd checked his list and found she'd been naughty, not nice.

The story, of course, was her own. She wasn't just trying to help with money while Dad recovered. She was determined that Santa would come—for us—even if he hadn't for her.

A number of women in the area had acquired employment at the General Electric manufacturing factory in Morrison, Illinois—about 30 miles away. She landed a job there—and a couple of months later, so did Dad. They commuted together for over twenty years, right up until retirement

## The Move to Harmon

We had only lived in Deer Grove for about two years when my folks decided to look for another place to live. I don't know *why* we moved, but move we did.

It was the same process as before, only this time, an expanded version of Deer Grove: find an abandoned farmhouse and offer to fix it up in exchange for cheap rent."

Harmon is about 9 miles east of Sterling. The town provided an elementary school but not a high school. This is a really small town. The posted population: 200. Yes, 200!

While living in Deer Grove, Lois had been attending high school in Tampico. When my folks decided to move, this created a problem. She wanted to finish high school with her friends and Harmon was too far.

One of her friend's parents offered to let her live with them until graduation.

That arrangement allowed her to stay and graduate with her friends.

The house we were to rent stood only a quarter of a mile from town. So Sharon and I could once again easily walk to school. Although both mom and dad were employed at GE, Sharon and I were now old enough to get to school and back on our own until they returned home.

Now a few words about the house itself.

Dad once again worked to improve the property by doing all the work himself. The owner, Mr. Rodenbaugh, would provide the material. He also continued to farm the land surrounding the house. So he became a good friend as well as landlord and one of my mentors.

This new old-house had electricity, running water, and an inside bathroom. Hurrah! Yet it had stood empty for several years.

Standing empty with almost no insulation against the winter cold, it needed a lot of upgrades. I think dad loved the challenge.

A wood and coal burning stove heated the dining room. This was our only source of heat until dad later installed a fuel oil stove for the living room. It was my job to get up before everyone and get that coal stove humming.

In preparation, I had to be sure to have both wood and coal sitting next to the stove, ready to go.

Dad and I would go down by the creek and gather fallen wood for the winter. Additionally, dad bought coal and had it delivered in the coal bin in a shack that stood right behind the house.

Here's the rub. To save money, he bought the cheapest coal available. This was called bulk coal—large, unprocessed chunks that had to be broken down to fit the stove. Guess whose job that was!

*After school, I would take a large ball peen hammer and break those chunks into usable pieces until I had enough for several days. Then stock the coal bucket next to the stove with enough for the day and next morning.*

*In northern Illinois, it frequently gets down to zero or below. And the house did not have insulation. It got so cold that the water in the chamber pots would freeze during the nights.*

*Chamber pots? Yes, the house did have a bathroom. Yet if the need arose, you wanted that chore to get done as quickly as possible and get back under the covers!*

*In the early morning, the alarm would go off and I'd jump out of bed, dress, put on my coat, and run down to get that blasted wood stove hot. Wow! Do I remember those cold mornings.*

Additional benefits to this property is that dad could use the adjacent buildings to raise chickens and pigs. He also had the farmer plow a large adjacent piece of land for a garden. A big one!

*It was huge!*

Rows and rows of strawberries, tomatoes, red potatoes, sweet potatoes, turnips, carrots, onions, cucumbers, peas, beans, watermelon, squash, and pumpkins. I remember it all: planting, weeding, harvesting, and canning. Work for each of us!

That garden produced so much that we went around the small town selling all that we couldn't use. Mom and Lois then canned shelf after shelf of fruit and vegetables. In the cellar we had a potato bin that filled an entire wall. You can bet we weren't going hungry.

Now in Harmon, we no longer raised rabbits. Instead we hunted. We shot rabbit, squirrel, pheasant, and quail. Dad also trapped in the local creeks to get pelts from muskrat and mink that he could sell.

My fondest memories of that time were of learning to farm. Although Mr. Rodenbaugh now lived in town, he continued to farm about 200 acres of corn, soy beans, wheat, and hay.

After the harvest, he sold most of the crop to the market. At the same time, keeping enough hay in the barn and corn in the corn crib for his other project. Raising beef.

In the fall every year, he bought about twenty steers and raise them on the grain and hay he hadn't sold. In the spring, he would sell them for a profit. Then begin the planting season again.

By the time we moved there I'd turned eleven. Fascinated and standing around watching him work, he began to include me. "Help me lift this." "Carry that over there." "Go into the barn and get this for me." As it was summer time, I had all day to hang around with him.

I rode on the back of the tractors (he had three) and learned how to hitch all kinds of machinery. Eventually I came to understand how the plow, disc, harrow rake, wagons, manure spreaders, combines, corn pickers, and so on all worked.

Then one day—when I was still only eleven—, he asked “Would you like to drive the tractor?” Wow! Would I ever? A farm tractor, even back then, is enormous to an eleven year old kid. So you bet I would!

That summer, and for the next several years, I learned so many things about farming. The various aspects of grain farming, handling equipment, and raising cattle.

Dad also decided to raise pigs, and chickens. Lots more to do but what a learning experience.

Later, as I grew stronger over the next few years, I hired myself out to various farmers in the area during the planting and harvesting seasons. However, that would come later and now was now.

I was still only about ten years old when we moved there and going into the fifth grade. The summer doesn't last forever and soon summer vacation was over. And so it was time to enroll in my new school.

## **Misery in School**

Until I entered the fifth grade, I was happy. I liked school.

Life's first real slap in the face didn't come until then—a wake-up call. The world includes some people who are not kind and loving.

You wouldn't expect anything like a teenage gang in such a small town. Calling it a gang is maybe hyperbole, reaching back to the memory of a boy.

Yet a group of bullies plagued my adolescent years.

Many if not most kids, go through some type of bullying. Yet no matter how well it's explained it's difficult for the victim. Not just enduring it but trying to understand why. I agonized about what was wrong or unacceptable about me.

The bullying may have had nothing to do with their like or dislike of me. I was small. Skinny! The puny new kid in town.

Easy to pick on. And for many young teenage boys, few things satisfy as much as showing off their new strength and dominance. And so I was bullied.

Day after day, a squad of about eight or nine guys would hurry out of the last class to lie in wait for me. My home was just out of town with only one way to get there. These boys—along with a couple of rowdy girls—would gather at the bridge of a small creek to have fun messing with me.

They never did any real physical damage. They focused more on humiliation than on harm. They shoved me around, knocked me to the ground, and threw dirt in my face and hair. I received my share of bruises and black eyes but nothing serious.

As we were all about the same age, the bigger problem was it carried right over into high school. Riding the bus, in the school hallways, at assemblies. Anywhere they could make me afraid and embarrassed. Especially when it happened in front of the girls.

I tried everything to get accepted. Not attractive enough to be of interest to the girls; not intelligent enough to run with the eggheads; not big or strong enough for athletics.

Eventually, I'd had enough. By then, I'd come to hate school. My grades dropped and I began skipping, sometimes days at a time. After repeated absences, I was suspended. So in the middle of my junior year, I quit.

## **Back to Chicago**

At some point in my sophomore year of high school, I met Donna Gibbs.

Mom and Dad maintained a close relationship with my mother's brother and his wife, Uncle Paul and Aunt Myrt. They lived in Chicago about 120 miles from Harmon. So every few weeks we

would either drive into Chicago or they would come and visit us.

One day, while visiting in Chicago, Donna's mother, a friend of my uncle's, stopped by along with her 15 year old daughter. Almost exactly my age. While the adults spent a couple of hours talking over coffee, Donna and I went for a walk. It wasn't long until I was bedazzled.

Donna and I began to write each other. (Remember, no cell phones, no internet..., the old days!) We wrote long handwritten letters and continued this for over year.

If my folks didn't seem to be going to Chicago often enough, I saved my money and took a Greyhound bus to "visit my uncle." Everyone saw what was happening and enjoyed watching our burgeoning romance.

Then, months after I quit school...,

*On one of these visits, my uncle and his son "Butch" were working on a project. Butch was a Boy Scout and Uncle Paul a Scout leader. To raise money for their troop they were collecting used newspapers for resale. I'd never heard of such a thing.*

*On weekends they would go through the neighborhood and gather all the old newspapers people would set out in the alleys. Take them home, open them fully until they had about thirty pounds of paper. Then fold those into thirds and tie them into a bundle.*

*Historically in Chicago, "junk men" would drive up and down the alleys on a horse-drawn cart yelling, "Rags, all iron." People would hear and give them their discards. Or they'd pick up whatever was lying around: pipes, mufflers, electric motors, anything they could sell. Including old newspaper.*

*These old men with their horses were a novelty to me. After filling their wagons with this junk, they would sell it to salvage yards for recycling. There's more money in this than you would suppose.*

*I learned that the Boy Scout troop was selling these bundles at \$3.00 for each 100 pounds of paper. Surprisingly, it doesn't take a lot of paper to*

*reach 100 pounds.*

*On that weekend alone, we'd driven around the alleys in my uncle's car and gathered hundreds of pounds of paper. In just a couple of afternoons! "Why not do this as a business?" I thought. Each day. Every day.*

Having recently quit school, I talked with my uncle about it. I could move in with him, gather papers in the afternoons and on weekends, transfer my credits and finish high school in Chicago.

Of course my parents didn't object. Devastated that I had quit school at home, this would give me a second chance. And the thought of jointly going into business inspired both my uncle and me.

*We decided to ask people in the neighborhood for help.*

*We bought a small DIY printing machine and printed up a notice. In it, I explained that I was a transfer student gathering used newspapers to help fund my education. But the junk men would often beat me to it.*

*Instead of putting their papers in the alley, would they save them for me? If so, they could put a newspaper in the window facing the alley and I would come up to their door to collect them.*

*The response was overwhelming. On the weekends my uncle would take out the back seat of his car and we would cruise the alleys. I'd hop out, run up to get the papers, and put them in the car.*

*Back home, we tied them into bundles and put them in the garage. By Sunday night we had filled almost half the garage. At three dollars per hundred pounds, we were on our way!*

As the summer waned, it came time to enroll in high school. I took city buses to Donna's school and explained that I'd moved in with my uncle. In order to do that, as a non-permanent resident of the city I would have to pay tuition. To qualify as a resident, I would have had to live in Chicago for over six months. The tuition was way too high and I couldn't afford it.

All right, forget high school! I'd just focus on making money. And we

did. We were doing so well that using the back seat of my uncle's car meant taking a gazillion trips to the garage. So we bought an old used pickup truck.

Instead of doing it just on weekends, we decided that I would spend all week cruising the alleys. And we were doing fine..., until the truant officer showed up. In Chicago at that time, you had to attend school until you were seventeen. And I wouldn't be seventeen until November.

Consequently, I would either have to move back home or risk being sent to a juvenile detention center. Alternatively, I would be allowed to attend a continuation school four days a week. This is a school for dropouts and expelled students. Not a happy group of kids.

So now I was back in school again. Not to get a diploma but to keep from going to a detention center.

Logan Continuation School is located in a rough neighborhood. About two-thirds of the students were black. The rest white or latin. And talk about bullies! At that point, I would have chosen the enemy I knew rather than this new group of hooligans.

*One day I stood in the lunch line when the person in front of me was shoved back into me. Of course, I was pushed back and stepped on the foot of the guy behind me.*

*He was black, about six foot three and twice my size. I asked him to excuse me..., but no such luck.*

*He grabbed my shirt, started calling me names and let me know what he thought of me. Furthermore, he'd see me after school and teach me some manners.*

*That may have been the only day in my life I didn't want school to end. Of course it did, and he and four of his buddies were waiting for me outside.*

*They shoved me over into a corner of the building and did the normal name calling, shoving me here and there, and all that goes with it. But then the big one on whose foot I stepped pulled open a switchblade knife*

*and held it to my chest.*

*I can't recall what he said. Lots of threatening talk and then they let me go. But by then I was dizzy with fear.*

Yet there was nothing else I could do. The rest of the school year I tried to be invisible. Just waiting for school to let out for the summer and for a reprieve from my captivity.

Even before school was out, when spring came and the weather warmed up, a deluge of junkmen once again crowded the alleys from wherever they had wintered.

Recycled newspapers now flooded the market. The price dropped to about thirty cents per hundred pounds. And we could no longer make the truck payments. It only took a couple of months for the business to collapse.

By summer, things looked bleak. Our business in the toilet, me with no job, and looking forward to several more months at Logan until my birthday. So I threw in the towel and returned home to Harmon.

The only bright spot for me at that time was Donna. I was so completely in love with her! Leaving Chicago was such a disappointment. Yet I promised to do everything I could to see her often, and did so.

When I got back home, living with my parents again, I took day jobs wherever I could find them. I worked for farmers, at a grain elevator, unloaded coal, helped load trucks, and so on.

I earned enough to pay for my vices—tobacco and alcohol—and also for tickets on the Greyhound bus into Chicago to see Donna, which I did every other weekend. And meanwhile, we wrote to each other every day. Every single day! Long handwritten letters, often fifteen to twenty pages long.

## **Disappointing Destiny**

I felt a helpless victim. As if life was just happening to me. I hated living in Harmon. There was nothing to do for entertainment. Just work, killing time in the pool hall, drinking beer, and longing for my girlfriend who lived over 100 miles away.

Sufficiently depressed and angry at life, I wanted to strike back. I didn't know at whom—or at what. Just anything to let out the anger and frustration I felt.

*I wasn't old enough to legally drink I started running with a group of older guys who not only bought booze for me, but invited me to join in as they went out to raise hell in the neighboring towns, just for fun.*

*Together we committed petty crime and vandalism. Although I wasn't the leader, I participated in stealing cars just to wreck them, threw rocks into the plate glass windows of stores, got into fights, and pretended to be a big shot.*

*Fortunately, I was never arrested. When I think of how my life could have turned out..., whew, was I lucky! I mean we're talking about grand theft, destruction of property, and probably more I've forgotten or never knew how to name.*

Those times were exciting in the moment, but was I happy? *Absolutely not.* I hated my life. What was I doing? I just felt angry and couldn't seem to pull my life together. It was infuriating.

In due course, I got a job working at a shoe factory in nearby Dixon, Illinois. Life got better then. I was able to afford my first car and had enough money to drive to Chicago. But my lifestyle hadn't changed much.

*One day in Chicago as we walked in the park, Donna took off my class ring and said she didn't want to go steady anymore. She wanted to be able to spend time with her friends and date other guys as well as me.*

*Well, of course, I flipped out. Actually threw a fit—yelling and cussing, took my ring and threw it as far as I could. "If you don't want my ring,*

*neither do I!"*

*Shattered, I returned home even more heartbroken. The only real person that mattered no longer wanted me.*

In hindsight, it's not hard to figure out. She was an attractive and socially engaging high school senior. Well-mannered, smart, with an active social life, including lots of friends.

I, on the other hand, was a filthy-mouthed, high school dropout, only one rung above a genuine hoodlum. On top of that, my neediness. Because my life seemed so empty, my need for her love and acceptance must have felt oppressive.

Which led to a total breakup. She wouldn't see me or talk to me anymore.

And I was devastated! Nothing compares to the loss of a first love.

## Turning to God

These feelings of everything going wrong led to a major turning point in my life. My conversion to Christianity.

In my family, we never once discussed religion. My parents never attended church and consequently neither did we kids. I had never even given it a thought.

By this time, Lois was married and living in the nearby town of Rock Falls. Both she and her husband, Everett, had started attending the Foursquare church in town and now were quite evangelical. Soon, Sharon became a convert.

Being a new and enthusiastic Christian, Lois did her best to carry out the command of Jesus to go and evangelize. She did her best to convince her family, but that wasn't working well for her.

Dad declared that nature was his god. And when she tried to witness to him, he would tear into her arguments and ridicule her for being gullible.

Although an adult married woman, I saw her leave our house many times in tears as she returned to her own home, rejected and deeply hurt by her daddy. He could be brutal in his arguments.

Of course, I behaved with just as much hostility. Egged on and feeling justified by dad's belittlement, I made fun of her and Sharon too.

When Lois and Everett visited, of course they talked about the church, now the center of their life. And one day, Lois was going on about her friend Betty. "Oh what an outstanding and quality girl she is!"

*By this time I had met Betty. So in my normally surly mood said, "Oh for heaven's sake, Betty isn't all that great."*

*“Oh yeah? She’s smart enough to know better than to go out with the likes of you!”*

*Of course I couldn’t let that pass. “You want to bet on that?” I said.*

And so I took that on as a challenge. I’m not sure if that was a setup or not, but within a few weeks Betty and I started dating.

Turned out, Lois was right. Betty was pretty great!

And she never pushed at me about religion. We just had a nice time together. She didn’t even talk about church constantly like Lois did. So one day when she invited me to a special service at church featuring a youth speaker, I agreed to go.

The guest speaker was a representative of the *Youth for Christ* organization. (Billy Graham traveled for them as an evangelist in his early years.)

Although I don’t remember the speaker’s message, I remember clearly his appeal or “altar call” at the end.

*He said, “If you’re here tonight without Christ, I can tell you how you feel. You may put on a good face, but within your heart you know something is missing. Something inside you feels empty. That something is a connection with God.*

*“You see, God made man for that very purpose, a relationship. But sin stands in the way. And although the Bible explains that all men have sinned, God has made a way to take away that sin. And he did this by sending His son, Jesus, to die for our sins.*

*“You don’t even have to believe, or have faith. Just ask Him to come into your life and forgive your sins. That will establish the relationship. And you can begin a brand new life.”*

When he talked about the emptiness, I immediately related. That was precisely what I felt. Empty. Something was missing.

So when he asked for those who wanted to begin a new life to come to the front to pray together, I was out of my seat before I knew what

I was doing. I didn't need to think about it.

*"God," I prayed, "if there is a God... honestly, I don't think I want to be a Christian. But one thing I do know. I'm on the wrong road now. So if you can change my life, I invite Jesus to come into my heart and I'll try to follow you."*

I truly had no desire to try to live a Christian life..., at least not the way Lois and Sharon were doing it. But I knew this one thing. I was on a road to nowhere and I wanted something different. It was an invitation that offered hope.

Did I suddenly acquire faith? No, of course not. And I feared that yet again I was only making a fool of myself.

Lois, on the other hand, was jubilant! As soon as the praying was over she walked up with a smile and gave me a huge hug. Told me she was proud of me.

*"Lois," I said, "I don't think I can be a Christian. To be honest, I'm not sure there is a God. And although I don't intend to be mean, the way you and other Christians live your life isn't appealing to me. I'm not convinced I want to be a Christian."*

*She said, "Harold, all of us have our doubts. Yet I promise you, if you'll do three things faithfully, you will grow as a Christian.*

*"Everyday, read at least one chapter of the Bible. Also, get on your knees and pray to God out loud. Just tell God whatever is on your mind. Don't worry about how to do it. And third, come to church as often as you can. Join with the rest of us who are just trying to learn how to follow Jesus."*

So I began doing those things. And, as she promised, I grew.

As I dated Betty and began attending church my habits seemed to change of their own accord. I wasn't trying to be different..., I just was different.

By changing the people I spent time with, old habits fell off. I discovered that those in church weren't fanatics. And no one

demanded anything of me. These were simply people trying to improve, and to live upright lives.

Little by little, everything changed for me. And as I changed, so did my environment at home.

Dad—who had been so critical of Lois—no longer railed against her. My changed behavior stunned him. He watched to see if my decision might be only temporary. Then he simply stopped his criticism. He just didn't know what to say or how to interpret it.

Mom and dad had been very worried about me. They saw me out of control, quitting high school, smoking, drinking and acting like a hooligan..., they feared for me. And I was now changed, different.

As my life patterns changed, I began to see reasons to set goals. Without a suggestion from anyone, I decided to finish high school. Not at *my* high school you can bet! I wasn't going back to that again.

I learned of a school in Chicago that would allow me to study remotely. (This was a long time before “virtual” study was common. Remember, no home computers or internet.) It was done as a correspondence course.

When I received my diploma, the first and only time I ever heard it: my dad said, “Son, I’m proud of you.” Wow! There’s nothing of more value to a boy than that.

Dad still wasn’t a Christian. Not yet. Still, he felt pride in seeing me settle down and begin to take charge of my life. And that simple diploma opened up a new avenue of opportunity for me.

*Eventually, both my parents became Christians. As well as a number of aunts, uncles, and cousins. Nothing is as convincing as seeing people’s lives change and watching them find new happiness.*